

PROVISION FOR THE BLIND IN
BELGIUM

L. Alleman

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*International Conference on
Rehabilitation of the Disabled*

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Provision for the Blind in Belgium

L. Alleman

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Address at the International Conference on Rehabilitation of the Disabled, Section XXII,
New York, March 18 to March 21, 1919

There remains for me to describe, ladies and gentlemen, a department which arouses perhaps more interest than any other by reason of the misfortune which has overwhelmed its pupils, the section for the blind.

Happily the number of blinded Belgian soldiers is not great. In addition to some scattered cases in the institutions of France and Belgium, the Institute of Port-Villez contains twenty-eight.

In the early days of the war, the Army Medical Service established a small special school for the re-education of the blinded at Amiens. As a matter of fact, there is no reason why the blind should be assembled with other wounded. The method of their re-education is absolutely different, their recreations are different, and their treatment is different. But when in March of 1918 the sudden advance of the enemy on Amiens put that city in danger, there was no course open to the Government but to receive the poor fellows at Port-Villez. It goes without saying that they were welcomed there as brothers. Thanks to the generosity of the "Relief Fund for Blind Soldiers," separate pavilions could be put at their disposition for lodgings and work-shops.

At Amiens were taught only the traditional trades for the blind—basketry, brush-making, and chair-repairing. At Port-Villez we added to the list massage, a trade which is certainly meant especially for the blind man who has the intelligence and the persistence for long and

patient study. We have not thought that the practical results obtained in other trades, such as carpentry and shoemaking, justified us in making an experiment with our blind in those lines. For to the blind more than to any other class of the disabled, failure means cruel despair. It is easy enough to work under the eyes or the attentive directions of a teacher, but it is a different matter—and we must look ahead to that time—when the blind man is thrown upon his own resources.

It has been proved that the blind man can support himself at brush-making and basketry, and these two trades are sufficiently important in our country to provide work for blind labor. We have made them, therefore, our chief reliance.

Of course reading and writing according to the Braille system are taught to all the blind. The more educated among them learn also stenography and typewriting.

The visitor to this section, as for that matter, the visitor in any school for the blind, is struck chiefly by the good spirits which prevail among the inmates. They find a real satisfaction in work, and you never see loafing here as in other shops. While working without cessation, they talk, sing, or whistle, and give the impression of being perfectly happy men.

Their sighted comrades gladly lead them on walks in leisure hours, and the association of variously wounded men allows one sometimes to see realized the vision of the fable writer—the blind man and the paralytic.



